

## “Eating Well”: the politics of production and relational aesthetics

Jenny Walden, *University of Portsmouth*

This chapter takes as its starting point a debate within art critical and historical circles of perhaps surprising longevity. Over the past five years the debate has continued concerning the phenomenon of “Relational Aesthetics” or “Relational Art”. The term “Relational Aesthetics” was one of the terms coined by the curator Nicholas Bourriard as a way of conceptualising various art practices emergent in the later ‘90s and continuing to the present day which have as their ‘raison d’être’ some form of social interaction or participation.<sup>1</sup> As Bourriard has it: “an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and *private* symbolic space”.<sup>2</sup>

That said examples of “Relation Aesthetics” in Bourriard’s canon, vary considerably from the more abstracted work of Liam Gillick to the more ‘sociable’ work of Rirkrit Tiravanija.

In terms of Relational Aesthetics the latter artist has become emblematic of the concept of ‘relational art’ and the ‘*ethico-political*’ position its aesthetic subtends, as argued by Bourriaud. The Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija is perhaps best known for his *Untitled (Still)* 1992 at 303 Gallery New York. For this ‘work’ Tiravanija moved everything in the ‘back rooms’ of the gallery, the office and storeroom etc into the main exhibition space, where the gallery director thus had to work ‘in public’, turned the storeroom into an open kitchen for visitors and in the gallery cooked curries for visitors, the left-overs of which further informed the ‘ex-verted’ exhibit space when the artist was not there. Similarly for a later work, *Untitled (Tomorrow is Another Day)* 1996 he installed a wooden reconstruction of his own apartment

and opened it for use by visitors, inviting them to ‘live’, i.e. cook and eat, wash, sleep and generally lounge in the living room.

He has more recently also extended his aspirations to encompass “The Land” as a ‘massive-scale artist-run space’ designed as a collective for ‘social engagement’ in rural Thailand.

This chapter critically explores the phenomenon of ‘relational aesthetics’ in relation to three themes; the extent to which we might consider social relations as underpinned by an understating of antagonism and difference, as opposed to an assumption of ‘conviviality’ and assimilated collective identity; the extent to which we might more strongly (than Bourriard) read relational aesthetics in terms of resistance to art’s commodification within capitalist social and economic relations; or different again from either of these, if there is an approach to relational aesthetics, understood through Derrida’s ‘ethical demand’, which opens up an ethico-political dimension which may be obscured by the two former approaches. For this latter, amongst other references, I make use of Derrida’s conversation piece entitled “Eating Well”<sup>3</sup> and I am making a ‘play upon’ this as it relates to the subject of Tiravanija’s work.

Such work we *may* understand as problematising certain notions of ‘exchange’ between persons and social relations as infiltrated through and through by capitalist exchange relations, epitomised by the commodification of art through the gallery ‘system’ by both ‘literally ‘exposing’ the gallery system and the artist as purveyor of commodity and offering an alternative as the ‘gift’ without return.

A more resistant version of this challenge however may be found in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn who is not a major feature of “Relational Aesthetics”. Where we might say

Tiravanija wants to deconstruct the autonomous, bureaucratised and commodified space of the gallery (and the autonomous figure of the artist, as further exemplified by his 'private living space') from within, Hirschhorn takes art out into 'illegitimate' spaces and places and 'trashes' its 'legitimate' materials and forms of display in order to disturb the normal inscription of difference between 'privileged art public' and the economically deprived groups who inhabit the locations of his works and by dint of that make the works their own.

*Bataille Monument* 2002, in Documenta 11, was a 'make shift' set of shacks, providing opportunities through books in a library, television and video installations and other visual ephemera to find out about and pay tribute to the life and work of the philosopher George Bataille. This was situated in the middle of a working class, predominantly minority ethnic, Turkish, housing project in a suburb of Kassel, Germany (the venue for the Documenta) and as part of the 'work' could only to be reached by the visitors by way of trips by a Turkish cab company. The effect of this work, as the art critic Claire Bishop suggests, was to

"...contrive a curious rapprochement between the influx of art tourists and the area's residents. Rather than the local populace becoming subject to what he calls the 'zoo effect', Hirschhorn's project made the art public feel like hapless intruders. Even more disruptively, in the light of the international art world's intellectual pretensions, Monument took the local inhabitants seriously as potential Bataille readers...The complicated play of identificatory and dis-identificatory mechanisms at work...were radically and disruptively thought-provoking...the Bataille Monument served to destabilise (but also to potentially liberate) any sense of what community identity might be, or of what it means to be a 'fan' of art and philosophy." <sup>4</sup>

More trenchantly and controversially perhaps, the exploitation inscribed in capitalist social relations is both repeated and critiqued in the work of Santiago Sierra who again does not feature in “Relational Aesthetics” but forms part of the critical literature responding to it. An array of his works: *250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People* 1999; *Workers Who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* 2000; *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined Sixty Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by Five People* 2000; *Persons Paid to Have their Hair Dyed Blond* 2001; *Wall Enclosing a Space*, 2003, both foreground the exploitative nature of labour and the reduction of *social* relations to a relationship between *things*, as well as folding the artist into this ‘critical’ situation as an exploiter himself.

Such works could be seen as dystopian nihilistic renderings of both ‘life as it lived’ for many people not often acknowledged in the ‘art world’ and of the exploitative relation that very lack of acknowledgement has inscribed within it. Arguably they are more than this to the extent that his work does indeed spill out into and across the ‘unmentionables’ of immigration, contemporary ‘enslavement’ to ‘slave-wage’ labour and precarious means of making one’s living. Bishop suggests, “The work does not offer an experience of human empathy... but a pointed racial/economic *non* identification, ‘this is not me’”.<sup>5</sup>

One could broadly say that all these works share a desire to both newly ‘work’ a notion of art’s *autonomy* and resistance to commodification in the very *heteronomy* of these ‘relational practices’ as ‘echoes’ of everyday life which yet ‘re-mark’ and bring the inequities and commodified reaches of everyday life to the fore. But I’ll say more about the notion of autonomy versus heteronomy later.

The criticisms levelled against Bourriard's concept of relational aesthetics have revolved around a re-visiting of various inflections of Marxist and Post-Marxist arguments in respect to art. As I have previously outlined, I want to consider these but will ultimately move to an argument coming from a slightly different place, more closely aligned to how I see Derrida's views of art and politics and how we might view art and how we might view politics today in ways which *may* be deemed more aligned to an *art* of the political than a *science* of it.

One of the well referenced arguments from Claire Bishop in connection with Relational Aesthetics stems from an article written in the influential journal *October* in 2002, soon after the English translation of Bourriard's work.<sup>6</sup> Claire Bishop's view of the theory of Relational Aesthetics and some of the practices identified as exemplifying this phenomenon is that the model of social relation invoked by Bourriard lacks 'resistance' and the 'antagonism' that is constitutive of relation, as Bishop reads it via the political theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>7</sup>

To summarise, Laclau and Mouffe build a notion of political relationships and the social sphere or 'community' on two principles, one a radicalisation of the idea of hegemony (the means by which the view of a particular group becomes 'universalised' as the 'dominant view') and the notion of the split or incomplete subject which derives from Lacan. Laclau and Mouffe recognise the logic of capital as a logic of dislocation and dispersal which does not produce the formed political subject of the 'proletariat' which will stand up against capitalist relations but instead various subject groupings or groups whose interests relate through a model of 'antagonism' such that at any one time one particular interest group may attain partial 'universalism' and thus partial and momentary hegemony over others. Hegemony and the democratic consensus are thus never fully complete and always open to further

contestation and antagonisms. Democracy is the continual drawing up of these antagonisms and partial subjectivities and subject identifications. Underpinning this model is the notion of the 'failed' subject from Lacan. The 'subject' is always held incomplete by the 'other' inscribed within it and unattainable. It is this very *incompleteness* which drives the subject to *desire for* identification.

It is tempting therefore to 'read' the works here cited as in some sense 'presenting' along a spectrum of incisiveness perhaps from naïve conviviality to resistance to exploitation, the fragile articulations of partial identifications through antagonism upon which the 'social' realm or 'community' rests. However, it may be argued, there is a need to read the works relation to the political with a far greater appreciation of the complexity arising from art's 'autonomy' or 'heteronomy' with regard to the social and political.

From a Marxist perspective what is at stake is less the question of politics and art in connection with the constitution of subjectivities and the discursivity of social relations, but instead the question of politics and of art as a question of the struggle over the commodity. As Stewart Martin suggests, "Whatever the marginality and precariousness of art's relations to received ideas about politics, it is in many ways fundamentally constituted in the struggle over its subjection to commodification. So, if we think of the political in terms of this struggle, we can see art as politically formed to its innermost core. In a certain sense we can see art as a primal scene of politics in capitalist culture."<sup>8</sup>

The debate over the commodification of art (and hence its affirmative character in supporting capitalist social relations) or its intrinsic resistance to commodification is well known. What has become clear is that there is no simple 'pure art' or 'anti-art' position to be had.

“...On the one hand, the anti-art position has had to confront the extent to which the dissolution of art into life is not simply emancipatory but dissolution of art into capitalist life. It has also had to confront the extent to which capitalist culture has itself taken on this anti-art function to this end. This reveals a critical dimension to pure art, which the anti-art position must recognise if its critique of art is to function as a critique of commodification. On the other hand, the pure art position has had to confront the extent to which art’s purity is a form of reification deeply entwined within art’s commodification, indebted to capitalist culture. This requires that the defence of art against commodification must incorporate a dimension of anti-art if it is to criticise this entwinement. Either way, art’s resistance to commodification is obliged to take the form of an immanent critique or self-criticism. This suggests that the self-critical constitution of modern art is due to its commodity-form.”<sup>9</sup>

Art’s autonomy is intrinsically tied to its heteronymous determination by the social. Stewart Martin suggests that Bourriard’s concept of relational aesthetics and its theoretical elaboration presents the extreme counter and in that sense the flip-side to Theodor Adorno’s concept of art’s ‘anti-social’ character. “Whereas Adorno seeks the critical force of art through the radicalisation of its *fetishism against exchange*, Bourriard seeks it through the radicalisation of its social *exchange against fetishism*.”<sup>10</sup>

Between these positions we see the re-enactment of the two sides of the same coin; a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy. Thus for Martin, Bourriard’s investment in the capacity for relational art to eschew ‘the object’ and produce social exchange which ‘escapes’ the commodification of capital is found wanting. We might say that Santiago Sierra’s works brings this weakness to the fore.

“...In these works the re-direction of our attention from objects to subject does not produce a space of inter-subjective conviviality, but the instrumental commodification of labour that social exchange can be reduced to in capitalist societies. Art is stripped of its aura of free association and acts out a tragedy: the utopian conception of art, that we should relate to it as if it were another person is realised in dystopian form, sweating in a cardboard box on a minimum wage.”<sup>11</sup>

I have sympathy with these readings but I want to provide another reading where the relationship between the political and the *ethical* may be further dwelt upon.

However I do not mean an ethics *of the present* so much as the *infinitely demanding* and *impossible* ethics that Derrida’s thinking calls forth and to which I suggest art can ally.

In *Specters of Marx* and other writings in which Derrida considers the political and ‘democracy’, as democracy-to-come, the political is ethical through and through in a way which binds us to the other *as an unnameable and inassimilable ‘other to come’ for which we have responsibility*.<sup>12</sup> This is very different from an ethics based upon the ultimately ‘autonomous’ subject with a conscience towards others, suggested say by the ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ dictum.

The exorbitant ethical demand in Derrida’s work, inscribed into the political, renders the time of the political a ‘time out of joint’, crossed by the impossibilities of redemption of the past or calculation of the future, if it is to be a ‘true’ politics unmarred by its violence towards the ethical.



For Derrida, the political is the tracing of this gap between representation and the groundlessness it seeks to obscure, and this is worked through in relation to the various encounters with the representations that he writes and talks about. Our responsibility is towards the intimation of this *différance* and limit. It is a *responsibility* because, within this gap, the exclusionary nature of our representations are opened to the other and the ‘*time of the other*’, as captured in Derrida’s important figure of the spectral and his resistance to ontology and, to an extent, materiality. Art is political in the sense that it is [not] representation but is capable of exceeding representation by ‘re-marking’ the intimation of the relation between representation and its inassimilable ‘other’.

Art is an encounter with the infinitely demanding and impossible to contain ‘other’, the ‘immemorial past’ and ‘always to come’ that is our responsibility; ‘that’ which calls for our unconditional hospitality and justice.<sup>13</sup>

Relational aesthetics *may* provide us with a means to reflect upon not what art ‘presents’ or points to as a utopia of *emancipation* or its dystopian opposite but as an opening onto to *responsibility*.

This is the distinction Simon Critchley makes between classical *anarchism*, concerned with freedom and struggles for ‘liberation’ and a different *anarchism* organised around responsibility, “an infinite responsibility that arises in relation to a situation of injustice.”<sup>14</sup>

Critchley is interested in a new found anarchism as an ethical-political phenomenon, stemming from Levinas and his critique of the ‘archic’ subject as the sovereign subject.

Rather for Levinas the subject is affected by its *relation to the other* in a way that refuses the self-positing sovereign subject; the subject is thus an ‘an-archic’ ethical subject...untrammelled by a politics of state sovereignty or substantiated community as the ‘arche’ principle.<sup>15</sup>

I want to draw this together by returning to Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Still)* talked about most often in terms of the ‘gift’ of cooked food and the social exchange of eating together.

In relation to this I want to bring together two statements;

1. “If the relation to the real is the realm of the ethical, and the work of sublimation is the realm of the aesthetic, *the aesthetic intimates the excess of the ethical over the aesthetic*”.<sup>16</sup>
2. “The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that...but since one must eat in any case and since it is and tastes good to eat, and since there is no other definition of the good, how for goodness sake should one eat well? And what does this imply? What is eating? How is this metonymy of introjection to be regulated? ... “One must eat well” does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself but learning and giving to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one’s own: this constitutes the rule underlying that statement, “One must eat well.” It is a rule offering infinite hospitality.”<sup>17</sup>

I take each of these in turn. Insofar as the aesthetic “allows” us to encounter the infinite and exorbitant demand of the ‘other’ in a mode of sublimation, which “takes the human being to

the limit of a desire which cannot be fully represented” and ‘we’ are “allowed a relation to (what Lacan calls) the Thing that does not crush or destroy us”, we ‘experience’ this ethical dimension. However, understood this way it has the structure of tragedy about it and indeed of heroic *sacrifice*. Antigone is the paradigm of the ethical sublimated through the aesthetic in Lacan’s Ethics of Psychoanalysis, for example.<sup>18</sup> But the tragic replays the ‘arch’ of the ultimately self-possessing and ‘authentic’ subject. The tragic subject is he or she who struggles in the pitting of desire against necessity in order to achieve “authenticity”, even as this may be on behalf of the ‘other’.<sup>19</sup>

Derrida traces this paradigm of the authentic subject through the structure of sacrifice in relation to his meditation on eating well. Insofar as the ethical subject is drawn from an essential ‘human’-ism, this subject bears the trace of a structure of sacrifice, whereby the animal is understood to be sacrificed for the ‘good’ of the community and the animal is also an ‘introjected’ substance of food in many cultures. The ‘other’ is interiorised and assimilated into the ‘self-same’. Derrida refers to other modes of introjection through the mouth, symbolically, such as the bread and wine of Christ’s body and blood in the terms of this sacrificial structure through which “we” become-subject through processes of “idealizing interiorisation”.<sup>20</sup> To bring it back to politics this is Hegel’s ultimately underlying structure for the community and the state.<sup>21</sup>

Derrida’s huge question is, how do we remain open to the other, responding and responsible to the ethical demand in a situation of injustice and offer unconditional hospitality and “eat well”? This takes the question of ‘eating well’ and what it is to live well as an ethical being, which indeed is increasingly a subject of science and politics, even bio-politics, into a different dimension of *responsibility*.<sup>22</sup> It is this ‘an-archic’, non-idealising; infinitely

demanding but non-tragic or ‘sacrificial’ structure of responsibility that gives us much more to think than we might have first thought about Tiravanija’s own project of ‘Eating Well’.

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Notes

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1. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* trans Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods

( France Les presses du reel, 2002) English Translation

2 Bourriard, N, *Relational Aesthetics* page 14

3 Jacques Derrida, “*Eating Well*”: *An Interview* in *Who Comes After the Subject* Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy eds.( London Routledge 1991)

4. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, (London, Tate Publishing 2005) pp 124-127

5. Bishop C, *Installation Art* p.123

6 . Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October*, Vol. 110, (Fall 2004) 51-79

7. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso 1985)

8. Stewart Martin, ‘Critique of Relational Aesthetics’ *Third Text* 21:4 (2007) (pp369-386) 372; Martin refers to Theodor Adorno’s treatise on art and commodification in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno, T, *Aesthetic Theory* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1996)

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9. Martin, S, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics' p.373
  10. Martin, S, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics' p. 382
  11. Martin, S, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics' p. 383
  12. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Trans Kamuf, P ( London, Routledge, 1994)
  13. See in particular Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-portrait and Other Ruins* trans Brault, P & Naas, M, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1993)
  14. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London Verso, 2007) p93. In this work Critchley refers variously to Jacques Lacan's rapprochement of psychoanalysis and ethics, as Lacan examines in his Seminar VII, published as Lacan, J *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* ed. J.A. Miller, trans. D Potter (London Routledge 1992)
  15. Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding* p.93
  16. Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding* p. 72
  17. Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well": *An Interview* in *Who Comes After the Subject* Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy eds.( London Routledge 1991) p.115
  18. Lacan, J *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* ed. J.A. Miller, trans. D Potter (London Routledge 1992) pp 243-270
  19. See Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding* p.73-77 Critchley discusses the tragic-heroic paradigm although here he does not particularly link it to the structure of sacrifice. I am drawing upon Critchley's reading of the tragic in order to link it to sacrifice.
  20. See Derrida, J "Eating Well" p.113
  21. See Critchley, S, *Infinitely Demanding* p. 115

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22. Derrida, J, "Eating Well" p. 115